

*The Reception of German Expressionist Drama in China*¹

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Abstract. Expressionist Drama has been an important phenomenon of Modernist Theatre. In China, however, not enough attention has been paid to it in the academic field. In the present article different trends in the reception of German expressionist drama in China from the Chinese May Fourth period to the 1940s will be discussed. Broadly, there have been two basic tendencies in the reception of German expressionist drama in Chinese drama. A part of Chinese authors mainly focused on the class struggle for political and revolutionary purposes, but did not absorb deeper features of the genre. Other Chinese playwrights interested in (German) Expressionist Drama discussed in their work problems of social reality touching on spiritual aspects of people's individual lives. At the same time the Chinese reception of expressionist drama can also serve as an introduction to Chinese contemporary drama as a whole.

Keywords: misreading, reception, (German) expressionist drama, Chinese drama

Expressionism as a phenomenon did not begin in the theatre, but was first exemplified by Edvard Munch's famous painting "The Scream". Expressionist painters wanted to change the rules of impressionism, which only copied the outside world. As Kasimir Edschmid, one of the most important theoreticians of expressionism declared, expressionists were no longer satisfied with mere description of the "facts" of modern life – factories, diseases, whores, hunger and chaos – but attempted to experience reality and therefore to learn the essence of these "facts", rather than to merely reflect their outward appearance (Schönfeld 2000: 112). In order to explore the essence of the fact, expressionist drama often manifested people's subconscious by including visual hallucinations, dreams, monologues, deformation, split personality, symbolism and nameless characters representing social beings. Expressionist drama can be seen as a kind of art which dramatizes people's subconscious, trying to produce

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“a spirit’s photography”. Persons in the play often express their real views on the reality departing directly from their subjective experience.

Expressionist drama can be dated back to the end of the 19th century, while it came to its early close by the start of the 1930s. There were two branches, one was Strindberg’s and O’Neill’s drama, the other was German expressionist drama. The former tended to explore the complexity of the human soul, while German expressionist drama was full of social conflicts and strong revolts, being concerned with generational conflicts, sexual relationships, opposition to industrial civilization and war, as well as other aspects of social contradictions. It also challenged social taboos, especially the sexual taboo.

The desire of influencing and transforming reality was really very strong in German expressionist drama. But this was only its external aspect. The other aspect reached beyond surfaces, it comprised criticizing and reflecting the distortion of the human soul by the modern civilization, and calling for its resistance. Both aspects were interrelated. According to Martin Esslin, German expressionist drama did not want to transform the society and reality directly, but to transform human beings. If there is a “new man”, then there is a new society. It was an absolute revolution in the genre. (Esslin 1993) On the other hand, transforming society meant trying to rescue the human soul.

In the works of the forerunners of German expressionist drama, there were two major themes. One had its focus on the fate of obscure, insignificant people. For instance, the Chinese translator of Georg Büchner’s masterpiece *Woyzeck* Li Shixun says that Büchner “knows why the people who have been ridden over and insulted do want to oppose the society” (see Büchner 2008: 191). In another play, *Spring Awakening* (1906), Frank Wedekind portrayed the suffering of Moritz, a young student who forced his entry into the school office to see the list of grades. Although he tried his best to study, he failed in his grades. Instead, he was punished at school and finally he took his life. Before that, he said: “I never met anyone who didn’t want the best from himself. There’ve been many people I’ve pitied for my sake.” (Wedekind 2007: 47)

Returning to nature and childhood was another major topic in the works of the forerunners of German expressionist drama. Büchner’s *Leonce und Lena* is a romance about a utopian world, showing a peaceful and beautiful life which could not be realized in the real world. Wendla, one of the heroines of *Spring Awakening*, tried to keep intact her spiritual home world of childhood, never giving up her natural and pure childhood moppet shirt, while refusing to wear the long gown of a nun, a symbol of adulthood. The more people suffered, the more they desired to go back to nature and childhood. The same aspect can also be found in the works of August Strindberg, the father of expressionism. In his *Till Damaskus* (*To Damascus*, 1898), the protagonist, The Unknown (the

stranger) imagined a canticle in the church would let him know the way back to his childhood. In the later works of German expressionist drama, the son in Walter Hasenclever's *Der Sohn* (*The Son*, 1914) is singing to the forest, while the parents in Reinhard Sorge's *Der Bettler* (*The Beggar*, 1912) are depicted as stars, merging with the sky and the earth. All of these symbols reflected a search for the integrity of the human soul in German expressionist drama.

At the early stage of German expressionist drama, as well as in its mature period, the main attention shifted to human suffering in the war and under the machinery of civilization. The playwrights' criticism not only pointed to the war and the social system which distorted and ruined the soul, but it also scrutinized it and its contradictions. By means of reproducing generational conflicts and patricide, *The Beggar* and *The Son* became metaphors of rebellion against temporal authority. The plays by Oskar Kokoschka, such as *Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen* (*Murderer, the Hope of Women*, 1909), *Der Brennende Dornbusch* (*The Burning Bush*, 1911), *Hiob* (*Job*, 1917), depicted cruel battles between the sexes. Sex was turned into a part of violence, or even became identical with violence. The impetus behind this phenomenon was rooted in the human alienation caused by the war. In the mature period of German expressionism, the representative works of Ernst Toller and Georg Kaiser also reflected the deep human misery caused by the war and the industrialized society.

Thus in contrast with the plays of Strindberg and O'Neill, the most remarkable feature of German expressionist drama was to focus on the suffering and distortion of the human soul, and its renewal process. Calling back the soul became the core topic of that type of drama.

From the Chinese May Fourth period to the 1940s, German expressionist drama received a great deal of attention from Chinese translators, critics and dramatists. There were a number of scholars and playwrights engaged in the reception of German Expressionist drama, Song Chunfang, Maodun, Luxun, Guo, Moruo, Tianhan, Zhang Ziping among others. Several magazines, such as the *Novel Monthly*, the *East Magazine*, and others, published critical articles and translations of German expressionist drama. This tide of reception transformed the context of modern culture in China. There was a natural demand for German expressionist drama. In response to the Chinese society's reformation from the May Fourth period to the 1920s, modern Chinese intellectuals were trying to establish a steady and balanced social system. A similar desire can be observed in the topics of German expressionist drama. As Maodun (Fangbi) said: "Expressionism shows the psychology of German intelligentsia in desperation searching for outlets after the world war." (Fangbi 1930: 261) His comment on expressionism was due to the perplexity of Chinese intellectuals at that time. Expressionism thus helped Chinese intellectuals to

manifest their ideal to reconstruct society and construct an ideal system in a more energetic way. However, Chinese intellectuals' pursuit of social reform was in fact only directed towards political revolution and class struggle, they overlooked issues of the human soul.

In Chinese modern critical circles, there were some misreadings of German expressionist drama. Our Chinese critics for the most part caught only such key words or phrases as "against the war, promoting humanitarianism, against the existing social system, the pursuit of construction of an ideal world", while expressionism's sharp social criticism and its reflection on the human soul and the fundamental purpose of calling back the soul were largely neglected. This misreading undoubtedly hindered a deeper reception of German expressionist drama. Even in the creative field of modern Chinese drama there was a similar tendency of simplifying the essence of German expressionist drama. In the following, I will try to provide some explanations for it, while clarifying the reception of this important phenomenon in modern Chinese drama.

The plays in modern China that took class struggle and the revolutionary transformation of society as their main topics, had indeed some similarities with German Expressionist drama. The authors' desperate pursuit of the political and revolutionary purpose led to characters' conceptualization and favored relying on merely formal and external aspects, not reaching the broader and deeper implications found in German expressionist drama. The so-called conceptualization meant that the theme of a play had to be expressed in a straightforward manner, rather than being revealed through a vivid reflection or concrete processes of the human's soul. Some of the heroes voiced the ideas of the proletariat, or were given a certain task by a progressive party to carry out the revolutionary mission. In Yuan Changying's *Front Fighters* (1928), a little soldier receives a secret mission to start a revolutionary uprising from a revolutionary executive. In *Double Ten Dream*, written by Houyao in 1922, a young man whose name is Yu Zhimian, meets some revolutionary martyrs in his dream. He is given the task to call for the young generation's struggle with the cruel reality and for national rejuvenation, as well. Being exclusively engaged with revolutionary tasks and goals, the characters in the play are turned into mere tools of the revolution. The whole structure of this type of a play, designed for political purposes and according to a revolutionary formula, became thus entirely subordinated by revolutionary goals and tasks, nothing else. It was the typical conceptualized style of this kind of play. All the main characters in the above mentioned plays, despite their strong will to rescue the distorted world, are left without any features of their inner life, without any manifestation of the human soul.

On the contrary, the other type of plays mentioned above have indeed formed a special field in the reception of German expressionist drama. They were no longer confined to the revolutionary class struggle. Instead, they expanded their topics to include broader aspects of life, such as the ideal to rebuild a social system, subverting the original social behavior of a character, criticizing the concept of social authority and hierarchy, conflicts between generations. At the same time they reveal facets of the inner life of humans as individuals. Plays such as Tian Han's *Spirit Light* (1921), Guo Moruo's *Sovereign Guzhu's Two Sons* (1922), Boyan's *Song Jiang* (1923), Bai Wei's *Revolutionary Deity's Suffering* (1928) and so on are all concerned with redeeming the human soul, as based on a specific emotional journey of the characters. Therefore, they were no longer conceptualized.

In Tian Han's *Spirit Light*, the heroine of the play Gu Meili happens to see one tragic scene in her dream: some homeless and starving persons are wandering on the road. Gu Meili wants to rescue them, but she is too far from them. After that, she suddenly sees her husband rescuing a sick woman, then she wakes up. When her husband comes back home, she tells him about her dream, and then they together pray for the people who were in the disaster, being determined to rescue people of their own nation. The issue may seem to be a bit simple and abstract, however, it is conveyed by a concrete dream, which is deep in the subconscious of Gu Meili and inspires her inner will to help the homeless poor. So, the play has been considered as the first genuinely successful play in the reception of German expressionist drama in Chinese modern drama, especially for its use of a dream to express the character's subconscious world. Besides *Spirit Light*, Tian Han's other two plays, *The Will of Life* (1929) and *Tremble* (1929), also have some features similar to German expressionist drama, especially in reflecting conflicts between two generations. The daughter in *The Will of Life* marries her elder male cousin and has their baby without the permission of her father. So when she brings her child to see her father, the latter is very angry and wants to drive her away at once. Yet the baby's crying touches the father to the extent that finally he accepts his daughter's marriage and her baby. In *Tremble*, the son hates his mother very much. For a long time, his mother is not kind to him, and deprives him of his right of being educated at school. When the son leaves school, the mother still does not fulfill her commitment of giving some property to him. So, the son intends to kill his mother, but instead kills a dog in a folded quilt. Then his mother suddenly wakes up and regrets having treated her son so badly. Although she apologizes to him, finally, her son still leaves home.

In both plays, the father and the mother are symbols of the authority of the older generation, while the daughter and the son symbolize the younger

generation's power. They are independent in their strivings, with the right and courage to determine their own destiny. Meanwhile, the attempt of the father and the mother to interfere with their children's freedom of marriage and education provokes the younger generation's resistance to the old generation and even generates an intense conflict between the two generations. During the conflict, the original social status and authority of the father and the mother is challenged and overthrown by the younger generation. In contrast, the younger generation becomes the ruler in the coming new world by resisting the father and the mother. These young people symbolize a strong desire to establish a new ideology and a better society, as the "New Man" had done in German expressionist drama.

The "New Man" not only appeared in Tian Han's Plays, but also in some other plays of the period, being embodied, for instance, by Sovereign Guzhu in *Sovereign Guzhu's Two Sons*, Song Jiang in *Song Jiang*, Revolutionary Deity in *Revolutionary Deity's Suffering* and so on. Yet it has to be admitted that the generational conflicts in the above plays are not as violent as those in German expressionist drama. The psychological and emotional process in the Chinese dramas has the tendency to remain somewhat abstract. Also, the form and the content of these plays do not combine very well.

However, the reception of expressionist drama had its highly positive impact on the creation of some masterpieces, combining the spirit and writing techniques of both branches of theatrical expressionism – German expressionist drama and expressionist drama of O'Neill and Strindberg. The emotional development of the characters attaining full maturity is revealed in such plays as Hongshen's *Yama Zhao* (1923), Yangsao's *Heart Song* (1924), Baiwei's *Linli* (1925), Gu Jianchen's *Gentry Manager* (1930), and Caoyu's *Wilderness* (1937). They drew on two spiritual dimensions of German Expressionist drama: firstly, they strive to be close to the supernatural world, calling for the integration with gods; secondly, they convey the true image of the real world by means of subconscious experience, emitting a cry from the depth of the soul. Creative techniques of expressionist drama, such as dream, symbolism, illusions, deformation, etc, favored the dramatization of the subconscious world, at least to some extent.

In the 1920s, *Linli* and *Heart Song* were two special poetic dramas, with some obvious parallels with expressionist drama. These two plays were written by a couple of lovers, Baiwei and Yangsao. As Prof. Zhuang Haoran said: "*Heart song* and *Linli* are companion volumes of poetic dramas about love in the middle of the 1920s." (Zhuang Haoran 2000) Both of them use dreams to express the internal world of the main characters, to show their pursuit and ideal in the subconscious world. *Linli* is an autobiography of the author herself, the

prototypes of the heroine and hero were Baiwei and Yangsao. Linli loves Qinlan deeply, she waits for him in the winter garden for the whole night. Finally, Qinlan comes, but he treats Linli coldly. No matter how eagerly Linli asks for love from him, his answer is that he cannot love anyone beside himself. This concept of love is definitely opposite to Linli's. She is willing to sacrifice all of herself for Qinlan. More precisely, she would sacrifice all for love. In desperation, Linli abandons the real world and walks into the dream world.

In the play, there are three dream worlds in which Linli gradually leaves the real world, while approaching at the same time the supernatural world. During the journey, she pours out her suffering in love to a goddess, the time god and the god of death, and presents her views about the world by means of deformed images. Finally, she dies in the real world, but is reborn in the supernatural world. The whole procedure of the dream is her real spiritual experience, standing for her pure and idealized pursuit in love and in life, surpassing the boundary of the material world.

Baiwei confessed she was very interested in German expressionist drama. So she certainly was inspired by German expressionist drama in her works. For instance, Linli's emotional journey from reality to the supernatural world is quite similar to the characters' pursuit in some German expressionist drama. In the dream she tells the purple rose goddess, the god of death and the god of time about her sufferings and all her sadness and loneliness, just like the chorus in *The Beggar* called for the integration of the soul and God.

As for *Heart Song*, the title itself implies that the main concern of the play derives from the interior world of the author's self. This play has been included in *The City of Memories*, an anthology of Yangsao's poetic dramas. In the preface, Yangsao says the anthology reflects his silly dream when he was young. In fact, the prototype of the traveler is Yang Sao himself, while the dream of the traveler echoes the author's subconscious. One day, when the traveler is wandering in the forest and does not know where he comes from and where he is going, he is very tired and sleeps in the forest. A forest goddess living in an ancient well finds the traveler. She is very delighted and thinks that he is God's gift to her. She appreciates his beauty, his pale face, his eyes with hidden bitterness, then soon falls in love with him and sings for him. Unfortunately, the traveler at the beginning cannot understand her passionate love, but keeps thinking about his little sister with her peachy face and black eyes. So, the forest goddess is very sad and goes back to her well, only leaving behind two tear drops. Then the traveler regrets his coldness to the forest goddess and finds that he himself is in love with her. So he looks for her in the forest. After a while, the forest goddess comes back, carrying a red rose. Once again together with the forest goddess, the traveler recalls his little sister's singing and follows her

song and her shadow, to leave the forest. At last he abandons the forest goddess. In fact, the forest goddess and the small sister symbolize different aspects of the traveler's love and life, with the forest goddess standing for his spirit and the little sister standing for his carnal desire.

From here it can be understood what the difference is between both lovers and why they depart from each other. It is most important that the images mentioned above are dictated by the character's dream, really reflecting their subconscious world. As their inner feelings directly influence the world around them, its images can often be deformed. For instance, when Linli and Qinlan meet again in the dream guided by the purple rose goddess, a terrible scene is revealed to Linli. The earth breaks, the palace and the house of the lovers collapses, the seaquake rages and a tiger roars. This scene is actually the visualized world of Linli's suffering in love.

Linli and *Heart Song* have been considered as aestheticism dramas by most of the critics, but the above discussion would indicate that both authors absorbed quite a lot from the techniques and artistic means of expressionist drama and its spirit.

By the way, there is an implicit dialogue between the plays, on their subjects, characters, images and situation settings. It is clear that both plays act as a dialogue between both authors, the couple of lovers, Baiwei and Yangsao, about their concepts of love and life. There is another reason for the similarities and dialogues between the two plays, as the authors had already read and discussed each other's manuscripts during the writing process.

In 1923, a famous drama by Hongshen, *Yama Zhao*, undoubtedly bears imprints of Eugene O'Neill's expressionist drama *The Emperor Jones* (1921), translated into Chinese by Hongshen and Gu Zhongyi in 1934. *Yama Zhao* is really full of visions, and its construction is very similar to *The Emperor Jones*. In *The Emperor Jones*, Emperor Jones is chased by the slaves, he runs into the forest and his heart is full of guilt and fear. Except the first and the last act in the play, all the rest of the action is concerned with his visions. In *Yama Zhao*, there are nine acts. The first one and the last one are reality scenes, while seven acts in between happen in the forest, all filled with the visions of Yama Zhao, the hero of the play.

Yama Zhao is also called Zhao Da in the play. He is a soldier in the Warlord Era, but he and the other soldiers cannot get any salary for six months. They are very poor and too tired to continue the work. Zhao Da knows where the battalion commander keeps the money. Feeling the unfairness, finally, Zhao Da steals 3000 coins of the soldiers' pay from the battalion commander and wants to go to the countryside to have a better life. With the money, he runs into the forest. There, he is in fear and loses his way. His mind is full of visions and he

goes through his memory. From the second act to the eighth act, he struggles with his visions fiercely. In each act, he enters into a dialogue with himself, crying out the real voice from his subconscious. He recalls lots of bad things he has done, stealing money, killing a person, setting a fire and so on. All of these things are not what he really wanted to do, but he was actually compelled by the miserable suffering of himself and his family.

The following visions trace Zhao Da's tragic fate in his former life. During the war, some soldiers go to Zhao Da's village to do all kinds of bad things: setting fire, killing people, robbing things. Zhao Da's daughter, his little son and his wife are all killed. In another illusion, Tiger Wang sells Zhao Da's home field to a foreigner without his permission and drives his mother to death. The tragic life certainly leads to Zhao Da's resistance to reality, but he cannot do anything. Life does not provide him with answers and hope, but only despair. So, in every illusion, his struggle with the evil man always ends in his shouting and the shooting of the gun. All of the illusions are mixed with the guilt and hate in the deep heart of Zhao Da. Finally, he has a breakdown and dies amid horrible images.

As Hongshen wrote: "There is no inherently good man or bad man, the good man or the bad man are all engendered by the environment. Also there is no completely good or bad man. Human actions are very complex. Man is possibly very kind in some aspects, but very bad in other aspects." (Hong Shen 1957: 490) Thus it is clear that Hongshen did not want to portray Zhao Da as an evil man. Instead, what he wanted to write about was the complex process of Zhao Da's soul. Actually, the seven middle acts in the forest cover the psychological aspect of Zhao Da. Hongshen uses visions and monologue to express every thrill of the character's subconscious, combining artistic means exemplarily with the spirit of expressionist drama.

In the 1930s, plays such as *Gentry Manager* (1930) by Gu Jianchen and *The Wilderness* (1937) by Caoyu also learned from *The Emperor Jones*, as they reveal a person's real views on the world through their subjective and subconscious experience. *The Wilderness* is one of Cao Yu's famous dramas. Most critics have interpreted *The Wilderness* as a story of revenge. However, in Cao Yu's own opinion he did not want to write about revenge. (Tian Benxiang, Liu Yijun 2001: 49). What he wrote about was the inner hell of Qiu Hu, the protagonist of the play. Eight years before Qiu Hu's family was damaged a lot by Jiao Da, a very cruel landlord. He occupied the land of Qiu Hu's family, killing Qiu Hu's father, forcing his sister to become a prostitute, and let Qiu Hu be thrown into prison. Eight years later, Qiu Hu escapes from prison and wants revenge for his family. But when he approaches Jiao Da's home, where there was a wilderness, he meets the white silly boy and is told that Jiao Da is dead already. He is disappointed.

There is a long series of tragic events in the play. The disasters he and his family had suffered are reenacted one by one in his illusion. The play culminates in an act which drove Qiu Hu to revolt against the world.

The impact of German expressionist drama gradually faded in the 1940s, although its artistic means can still be sporadically traced in some later Chinese dramas. Thus after a long interval of nearly half a century, in the 1980s, a new movement called “exploratory drama” emerged in China. It concerned both the form and content of drama. Plays such as Gao Xingjian’s *Signal Alarm* (1982), *The Station* (1984), *The Wild Man* (1985), Ma Zhongjun’s, Jia Hongyuan’s and Qu Xinhua’s *Heat Flows Outside the House* (1980), Liu Jinyun’s *Uncle Doggie’s Nirvana* (1986), and Liu Shugang’s *Death Visiting the Living* (1985) apply skillfully hallucination, dream, split personality and other artistic means typical of expressionist drama. Some of these plays also reveal closeness to the spiritual features of expressionist theatre. For example, *Uncle Doggie’s Nirvana* presents Uncle Doggie’s subconscious progress of the soul. Gao Xingjian’s play *Signal Alarm* includes a long monologue, to reveal one’s deep desire. In *The Wild Man*, a battle rages inside an ecologist between emotion and his career pursuit. In *The Station*, polyphony is used to express a person’s different attitudes to the world. It imitates Bertolt Brecht’s famous *Verfremdung*, “defamiliarization”. As Gao Xingjian has admitted, he was influenced quite a lot by Brecht, especially in what concerns the method of expressing one’s criticism of the world. In Gao Xingjian’s plays some other artistic means of expressionist drama can also be observed, such as typification and deformation, especially in his *Between Life and Death*.

In the 1990s, pioneering experimental playwrights such as Meng Jinghui, Zhangxian and others tried their best to learn from Western modernist drama, but their works have not yet reached beyond applying external techniques and effects of expressionist drama.

The experience of Chinese drama learning from German expressionist drama can provide substantial guidance to the whole history of modern Chinese drama during the 20th century, to the present. It can also well illustrate important aspects of the intercultural process between the West and the East.

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